

From the Planners' Bookshelf...

Some Kind of Paradise, A Chronicle of Man and the Land in Florida

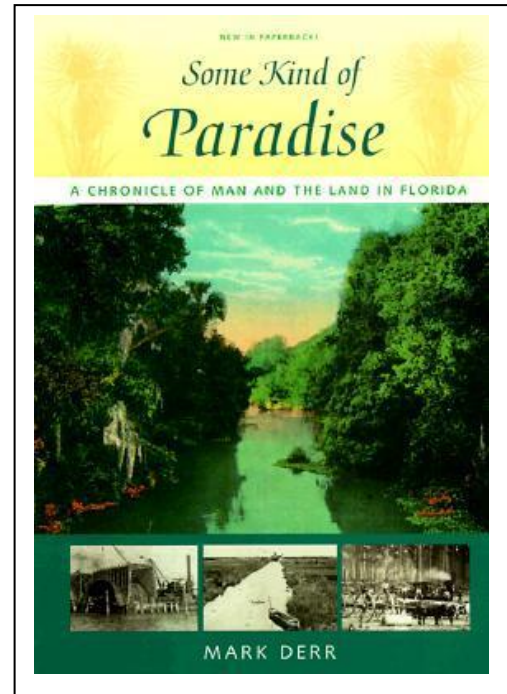
Mark Derr, University Press Florida, Gainesville, Florida, 1998; (Florida Sand Dollar Books, Paperback), 1998.

Overview.

Mark Derr's book offers a great perspective on the history of Florida from its geophysical origins to the landing of Ponce de Leon in 1513. The Pre-Ponce story is fascinating, well researched and well told. The summary below centers on a few aspects of the total presentation: the Original Animals and the Early People.

The Emerging Florida Land Mass.

"Some 50 million years ago, the peninsula was an island south of North America: 40 million years later, there was nothing. During the succeeding epochs, fluctuating sea levels created and obliterated Florida peninsulas that were shorter and squattier than the present one. The cycles grew more frequent during the Pleistocene Ice Age (2 million to 10,000 years ago) when each glacial advance exposed nearly all of the Floridan Plateau and each withdrawal reflooded successively smaller portions of it. The ocean's oscillations cut eight identifiable terraces or beaches into the limestone – at 250, 215, 170, 100, 70, 42, 25 and 12 feet above today's sea level – which, today, are clearly identifiable at various locations around the state."



The Original Animals of Florida.

"Enamored of Florida's delightful climate, paleontologists early in this century [the 20th] spoke of the peninsula as the 'Ice Age winter resort' for North America, a haven for beasts fleeing the advancing glaciers. While that view strikes experts today as anthropomorphically simplistic, it nonetheless conveys a sense of the congregation of animals that gathered on the peninsula from all latitudes throughout the epoch."

"During the four major glacial periods of the Pleistocene, the exposed Floridan Plateau was dominated by dry grasses interspersed with hardwood forests and bogs, which supported not only fugitives from the north but also species from the more arid regions of western North America and tropical animals foraging northward."

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"The most dramatic changes in animal demographics have come through the deaths of entire families of animals. While some scientists attribute this to asteroid attacks, other paleontologists have provided solid, if less astronomically spectacular, evidence that the dramatic shifts in climate are directly tied to the extinctions; and Florida's fossils support this view. There have been eight such catastrophes during the past nine million years..."

"The largest of these mammalian extinctions occurred at the end of the Pleistocene, between 15,000 and 10,000 years age B.P. ("before present", as scientists count time), during which time glaciers reached their farthest advance south and began their long retreat, thawing the world's deepest freeze. The rising waters washed over the edges of the fully exposed Floridan Plateau, and rain fell so heavily that it lay on the ground for months at a time. Everywhere vegetation changed to meet new conditions, and the animals suffered. The cycles of changing climate continued for the first four millennium of the Holocene Epoch. Around 6,000 years ago, the conditions again warmed, and Florida began to blossom with the flora and fauna common into the [current] historic period."

"The Everglades showed up...around the time the Egyptians started building the pyramids. "...in the last Ice Age so much water was locked up in the great ice caps that the level of the sea was 600 feet lower than it is today." "In the Northern Hemisphere the ice gradually melted [starting about 15,000 years ago], so the edge of the ice-sheets retreated northwards; by about 8,000 BC [10,000 B.P.] much of central Europe was free of ice." "After about 5500 BC [7,500 B.P.] the climate became even warmer and wetter, so that the species of trees existing to the present day could flourish." "It was only about 5,000 years ago – after prehistoric man was already writing, making pottery, smelting copper and brewing beer – that seas approached current levels and modern climate conditions prevailed."

The Early People of Florida.

"Some of the American Indians...may be descendent of these 'archaic white' stocks, as they are sometimes called. They probably moved across the Bering Strait, then a land bridge joining Asia to America, about 30,000 years ago, to be followed by later migrations of Mongoloid peoples across the same bridge."

From Mark Derr's work come several time markers. "Although archaeologists disagree over the precise date, sometime between 20,000 and 15,000 B.P. humans first settled the peninsula. Finally, 10,000 years ago, the ice-sheets retreated for the last time. By then a far more advanced man, *Homo sapiens*, had emerged to take advantage of the favorable conditions."

These peoples, known as the Archaics, established semi-permanent villages that moved as food, disease and neighbors changed. "Around 4,000 years age (2000 B.C.), the Archaic people of Florida and Georgia began making pottery – eight centuries before the other people in North America. Around 1000 B.C., people in southeastern North America began cultivating corn and squash to supplement what they gathered." This Transitional period saw the regional differences became distinctive by 500 B.C.

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“Over the next millennium, the Deptford people around Tampa Bay created a new style of village design, which featured permanent mounds, constructed not of trash but of soil hauled from the surrounding countryside. So pronounced was this development around A.D. 500 that archaeologists have designated it as the Weeden Island culture...” With the Weeden Island group, “...apparently for the first time, Florida Indians established large villages that functioned as independent political entities or capitals of a circumscribed territory.”

The Fort Walton Culture evolved as “...invading groups from the powerful Mississippi culture of the southeast repeatedly overran Georgia and north Florida between A.D. 800 and 1000 and finally absorbed the indigenous Weeden Island people...and firmly established a new society in the valley of the Apalachicola River, which archaeologists refer to as the Fort Walton culture.”

Separate Confederations and Tribes - “At the time of Ponce de Leon’s landing in 1513, the population of these peoples [the tribes and confederations of Florida] stood at approximately 100,000.” The following table has been constructed from Mr. Derr’s information:

- **“Timucua Confederation** of fifteen separate and sometimes warring groups occupied the northern third of the peninsula with 48,000 people:
 - Western Branch: Potano, Yustaga, Ocale, Utina, Osochi.
 - Eastern Branch: Saturiw, Acuera, Freshwater.
 - Tocabaga, alternatively under the Timucua and Calusa
- **Calusa** occupied southwest Florida to Cape Sable, inland to Lake Okeechobee with 20,000 people.
- **Tekesta**, with the Jeaga, Ais and others, occupied southeast Florida from Florida Bay to Biscayne Bay with 7,000 people.
- **Apalachee**, the Panhandle heirs of the Fort Walton people, controlled the trade routes from the upper Gulf coast and Mississippi valley with 25,000 people.

Conclusion.

In my Euro-Western-Centric world, the “discovery” of America was always the beginning of a new era in civilization. However, as Mr. Derr and others [see the Suggested readings] effectively point out, sophisticated civilizations were present in America for thousands of years before Columbus and Ponce de Leon. *Some Kind of Paradise, A Chronicle of Man and the Land in Florida* by Mark Derr is a worthwhile read.

Related Readings.

1. Bronoski, Jacob; *The Ascent of Man*, Little, Brown and Company, Boston | Toronto, 1973.
2. Cochran, Gregory and Harpending, Henry; *The 10,000 Year Explosion, How Civilization Accelerated Human Evolution*, Basic Books, A Member of the Perseus Books Group, New York, 2009.

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3. Dawkins, Richard; *The Ancestor's Tale, A Pilgrimage to the Dawn of Civilization*, Houghton Mifflin Company, 2004.
4. Diamond, Jerad; *Guns, Germs and Steel: the Fates of Human Societies*, W. W. Norton & Company, 1997.
5. Fagan, Brian, *Cro-Magnon, How the Ice Age Gave Birth to the First Modern Humans*, Bloomsbury Press, New York, 2010.
6. Grunwald, Michael; *The Swamp*. New York, NY: Simon & Schuster, 2006.
7. Huyghe, Patrick; *Columbus Was Last, from 200,000 B.C. to 1492, A Heretical History of Who Came First*, MJF Books, New York, 1992.
8. Illinois Museum; *Ice Ages, When Have Ice Ages Occurred?*, Illinois State Museum, www.museum.state.il.us, April 30, 2007.
9. Mann, Charles C.; *1491, New Revelations of the Americas Before Columbus*, Vintage Books, A Division of Random House, Inc., New York, 2006.
10. Mumford, Lewis; *The City in History, Its Origins, Its Transformations, and Its Prospects*, Harcourt, Brace & World, Inc., 1961.
11. National Parks Service; SEAC is the **NPS Southeast Archaeological Center** determining dates based on radio-carbon techniques.
12. Readers' Digest Association; *The Last Two Million Years*, Reader's Digest History of Man, 1974.